

Infernal relations of rich and poor

From Hell, directed by Allen and Albert Hughes

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21 November 2001

From Hell, directed by Allen and Albert Hughes; written by Terry Hayes and Rafael Yglesias, based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell

“One day men will look back and say I gave birth to the twentieth century.” These words attributed to Jack the Ripper are displayed on the screen at the beginning of *From Hell*, a new film about the notorious 19th century serial killer.

The directors, Allen and Albert Hughes (*Menace II Society*, *Dead Presidents*) have chosen to interpret the Ripper case, which took place in London in 1888, as “a ghetto story.” According to Albert Hughes, “It concerns poverty, violence and corruption, which are the themes we deal with in our movies because they fascinate us. These particular characters happen to be white, but all poor people have the same problems.” Brother Allen adds, “What also intrigued us was the psychology of Jack the Ripper—his behavior and the hysteria he incited ... We’re revealing it [the story] from the perspective of the people who lived in squalor. In the neighborhood where this terror was inflicted.”

From Hell, referring to a phrase used by the Ripper in one of the letters he sent to Scotland Yard, is based on the graphic novel of the same title written by Alan Moore and drawn by Eddie Campbell.

Five prostitutes witness the marriage of a fellow “unfortunate” from the horribly impoverished Whitechapel district of East London. Later, as they take care of her child, they watch in horror as the woman and her husband, known only as “Albert the artist,” are seized by mysterious, well-dressed assailants. Forced to earn a living on the street, the group’s leader, Mary Kelly (Heather Graham), an Irish rebel, places the child in an orphanage. The movie cuts to a surgeon’s college, where the mother strapped to a gurney, is the subject of the latest, cutting-edge procedure—a

lobotomy, rendering her insane.

The grisly murders of the prostitutes begin and only Inspector Fred Abberline (Johnny Depp) grasps that the evidence, police forensics being in its infancy, points to a murderer far more educated and knowledgeable about anatomy than the girls’ violent pimps. The uncorrupted Abberline is thwarted by his superiors, but determination and opium-induced visions eventually lead him to the trail of an elite branch of the police. This squad covertly protects a lodge of the Freemasons, a cult-like group which includes some of the wealthiest and most powerful men banded together to purge society of “socialists, Jews and foreigners.”

Abberline discovers that Sir William Gull, the Royal Family’s physician and a member of this lodge, is Jack the Ripper. The respectable Gull is avenging, Freemason-style, a monarchy threatened by the union of its heir-to-the-throne, Prince Albert (“Albert the artist”), to a former prostitute. The union, a Catholic ceremony witnessed by the five women, has already produced a legal offspring. Gull is also avenging a monarch, whose predilection for “the unfortunates” has left him dying of syphilis. In the course of trying to prevent the murders, Abberline falls in love with Mary Kelly, who with his help escapes to Ireland with the child.

In the film’s production notes, screen writer Rafael Yglesias discusses the theory of the Crown conspiracy: “Whether the British monarchy was literally involved in the Ripper murders doesn’t diminish the power of the accusation leveled at the ruling class. That the authorities refused to even consider the possibility the suspect might be wealthy speaks volumes about the Victorian era. Society’s ills were viewed exclusively as the fault of the poor and the lower class.”

The film is a period thriller clearly intended to shed

light on present-day problems. The undeniably talented Hughes brothers wanted to create a commentary on the relations between rich and poor. Again, from the production notes: “The city’s vast disparity of wealth produced masses of poor and indigent, many of whom congregated in an area known as Whitechapel. The dirty, seamy slum was a haven for drug use, prostitution, alcoholism and random street crime.” To explicitly blame poverty, violence and corruption on class society is a rarity in Hollywood films. The movie’s saturated colors and shadows, remarkably crafted transitions and exacting detail speak to the creators’ commitment to this theme. In one defining scene the women, unable to afford so much as a bed, are tied together on a bench, released in the morning by the landlord to resume their brutal struggle for survival on the streets.

But a brutal and *futile* struggle in which they face an omnipotent elite. The very manner in which the Ripper is depicted suggests the uneven character of the conflict. The sleek, penetrating character of the Ripper’s actions have an exhilarating quality, always surgically clean, precise and thorough—he is a grand and elegant presence. On the other hand, his pursuer (Abberline) is described by Depp as being “beaten up life,” relying “on self-medication to get through the day... He is a flawed hero enduring an enormous internal struggle while trying to cope with horrendous unfolding events.” He is no match for the murderer.

After all, what is the significance of the words attributed to Jack the Ripper which open the film? Do the filmmakers want to suggest that the mass murder of the helpless captures the essence of the 20th century. If so, this is a very demoralized and misguided conception. It is not accurate in regard to the twentieth century or to the period in which the film is laid.

The conditions in London in 1888 were indeed atrocious. In the East End, “with its diseased, vermin-infested, and overcrowded tenements, its filthy, unpaved streets, its criminals waiting for victims in dark courts and alleys”—in the words of one historian—one-third of the population lived in abject misery.

These circumstances, however, were not simply passively accepted. This was also a time of explosive class confrontations. In 1887 massive protests erupted in London, including Bloody Sunday in November in

Trafalgar Square which involved tens of thousands of workers battling it out with police. One of the participants that day was Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, who with many other socialists, led the struggle to develop the working class both organizationally and politically. The famous match girls’ walkout of 1888 ignited a strike wave the next year that drew in tens of thousands of gas workers, dockers and seafarers.

Frederick Engels wrote about the emergence of the new unions: “These new Trades Unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organizations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways... And they are organized under quite different circumstances—all the leading men and women are Socialists, and socialist agitators too. In them I see the real beginning of the movement here.” This was also the period in which George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and William Morris turned toward socialism.

This side of London life in 1888 is a closed book to the Hughes brothers. Not surprisingly, they project into the past their fascination with “gangster” elements, the “underclass,” as they term it. This in itself is an impressionistic response to contemporary inner city life. Of course the filmmakers are not obliged to treat the history of conscious working class struggle in their film, but the fact that its spirit is so entirely absent, that the poor are simply portrayed as being feasted upon by the rich, indicates a disorientation and tells us something about the ideological difficulties of our own time.



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